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Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/15k0c25d>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 25(3)

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/B3253015921

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

COMMUNITY AND EXCLUSION IN THE GAY MECCA

By Andrew Levine-Murray



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The Castro district in San Francisco, California is often represented and described as an almost utopic community for sexual minorities — a home and site of attraction for those individuals who experience marginalization due to sexual orientation. In fact, the Castro is frequently referred to as the “gay Mecca,” and, for many, the Castro is a real-life “Land of Oz.”¹

However, demographics of and observations pertaining to race, class, and gender relations within the Castro tell quite a different story. According to Census data, the Castro is a particularly white, wealthy,

1 Jim Duggins, “Out in the Castro: Creating a Gay Subculture, 1947-1969,” in *Out in the Castro: Desire, Promise, Activism*, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco, CA: Leyland Publications, 2002), 17.

and male neighborhood in relation to San Francisco as a whole. In fact, according to data from the 2010 Census, in the most central census tract of the Castro, 81% of residents are white, 63% are male, and 51% of households earn over \$100,000 per year². Compared to San Francisco as whole — in which only 48.5% of residents are white, 50.7% are male, and 36.5% of households earn over \$100,000 per year³ — the demographics of the Castro are significantly skewed. Thus, even though the Castro is more open in regard to various expressions of sexuality, it continues to house hierarchies based on race, class, and gender.

Interestingly, on the corner of Market and Castro St. on weekend nights, a group of low-income queer people of color consistently congregate — right in the heart of the Castro but quite literally on the margins of Castro social life.

Following these observations, my overall research project explores the ways in which marginalization of certain types of people occurs even within public spaces delineated for already marginalized groups. More specifically, I examine how low-income queer people of color navigate and negotiate queer urban enclaves, such as the Castro in San Francisco, that present themselves as open to all but are predominantly populated by white middle class men. What draws this group of low-income queer people of color to the Castro while simultaneously keeping them on the corner?

In this paper, I will make a series of three points. First, I will describe what draws members of this group of low-income queer people of color to the Castro. Second, I will explain why the group exists at the margins of Castro social life. Finally, I will detail the significance of the group for its members, particularly in relation to the social context of the Castro.

Methodologically, my research project is broken up into two components. The first component involves participant observation. During weekdays, I volunteered at a community organization and observed daily happenings of the Castro community. More importantly, however, on weekend nights from the last week of May to the present, I hung out on the corner of Market and Castro St., making observations and eventually

2 United States, Census Bureau, Population Division, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics, Census Tract 206, San Francisco County, California: 2010," *United States Census 2010* (Washington: US Census Bureau, August 2011).

3 United States, Census Bureau, Population Division, "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics, San Francisco City, California: 2010," *United States Census 2010* (Washington: US Census Bureau, August 2011).

immersing myself in the group of low-income queer people of color who consistently congregate there.

In conjunction with participant observation, I conducted in-depth interviews with low-income queer people of color who spend time with the group that congregates on this corner. Interviews lasted from 60 to 120 minutes and were broken loosely into three portions. The first portion asked about participants' experiences in the Castro, the second covered experiences in their home neighborhoods, and the third explored participants' re-imaginings of the Castro as a more ideal place.

For the purpose of this article, the conceptual framework I will use is W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness," but with a bit of a twist. W.E.B. Du Bois initially used the term "double consciousness" to describe the ways in which African Americans comprise competing identities — one being American, the other being black — as well as a tool to investigate the ways in which this embodiment affects their daily lives. For my project, however, I will use "double consciousness" to refer to the ways in which the queer people of color in my study, particularly gay black men, embody contending identities that influence the ways in which they negotiate different spaces, particularly the Castro.⁴

For my first point, I will begin by identifying the factors that draw members of this designated group to the Castro, thereby shedding light on the role the Castro plays in their lives. All respondents are drawn to the Castro because it provides them with a space in which they can be their full selves, a place they can "let loose" and be more open and free with their sexuality and behavior. In this way, the Castro functions as a stage for low-income queer people of color to express — or "perform" as Judith Butler⁵ would put it — their true "gay" selves more comfortably. As one respondent stated, "The Castro is the only neighborhood I can actually go into and become a totally different person...It's definitely a place that I consider I can be 100% myself...[especially] in terms of relationships and acting gay."

The function of the Castro space for low-income queer people of color cannot be fully understood, however, without consideration of the respondents' experiences in their home neighborhoods. In their

4 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990).

home neighborhoods — all predominantly low-income and black neighborhoods such as Bayview in San Francisco and East Oakland — respondents reported experiencing both blatant and subtle homophobia. This included derogatory remarks or laughs directed toward them on the street or in public places such as barbershops. In addition, respondents reported having no services for queer people in their neighborhoods and little visibility of queer individuals in their communities. In this way, respondents struggled with being gay in their predominantly low-income and black neighborhoods, given that gayness was either invisible or faced hostility. In fact, in accordance with the work of Kenji Yoshino⁶, many of my respondents noted “covering” in their home communities. This meant they would tone down their “gay” behavior for fear of inciting violence or hostility from others. As one respondent explained, “I would go out there [to the Castro] to let go and have fun and just not have to worry [about violence and ignorance]. Like, oh am I swishing too much? Am I being too loud?”

Although the Castro provides a stage for these low-income queer people of color to be their “true and full selves,” they remain on the margins of Castro social life. This begs the question: why?

For one, there are real economic barriers to integration and engagement with the Castro community among my study group. All my interview participants explained that the Castro is an incredibly expensive place. As one respondent put it, “poor people...can’t go to the club and spend what someone else could from a different class...you can’t have fun...and, you know, that’s why you see people drinkin’ over there by the red tables or the MUNI station...and in a sense having their own club outside the club.”

Perhaps more importantly, at least on a more psychological level, many members of my study group have experienced or heard stories of racial hostility and racism within the Castro. Some interview participants noted hearing the n-word being thrown toward members of the group, and one respondent experienced more subtle racism when an employee of a community store used racially-coded language to demean him. In accordance with literature on the effect of everyday racism

6 Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2007).

from Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes⁷, these experiences and stories of racism have a profound effect on members of the group. As a result, my study participants noted feeling uncomfortable in the Castro in certain contexts, such as weekdays or at predominantly white bars. The areas and times in which they feel comfortable in the Castro — such as the corner of Castro and Market St. on weekend nights — are thus limited. Even when others don't personally experience racism, they are very aware of the racial hierarchy within the community — a hierarchy in which they occupy a lower position. As one respondent puts it, "If you're an older white gay man, [the Castro's] the place to be." As a result, members of this group navigate the community accordingly, never taking too long in Walgreens so that employees don't suspect them of shoplifting.

Lastly, there are simply few places for members of this group to go to in the Castro. In terms of nightlife, the number of places of interest for members of the group is dwindling. Essentially, bars that historically attracted a more racially and economically diverse clientele have been consistently replaced by bars that cater to a more white and middle class crowd. It's not surprising then that many respondents accredited this shift to racial and class motivations of business owners and community members in the Castro.

Here again we see the notion of "double consciousness" at work, although in a more complex way than Du Bois' initial conceptualization. Members of my study group navigate the Castro according to their gay, of color, and lower-income identities. They are accepted in terms of their gay identities but face barriers to integration due to their class and racial positions in Castro hierarchies. It's as if they have one foot in and one foot outside the door to community inclusion in the Castro.

In view of such marginalization, the group is significant to its members in a variety of ways. On the surface, the group serves as a sort of emotional and economic support system by acting as a source of advice and fun while simultaneously offering a network through which members can obtain financial and job searching assistance.

Perhaps more importantly, however, the group has played an important role in the identity formation of many of its members. According to most of my interview participants, the group on the corner of Castro and Market St. helped them become more comfortable with

⁷ Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes, *Living With Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

their sexual identity, specifically in their identification as “gay.” Many members of the group first identified as “bi” or chose not to identify as gay before engaging with the group of study. As one respondent put it, “[I became more comfortable with being gay by] just meeting more people like you and comparing stories and backgrounds...like, oh he grew up in the hood, he wasn’t so rich...y’know, they’d just break stereotypes [in terms of what it means to be gay]...It broke down a lot of walls.” For him, being “gay” meant being like normative representations of gay men on mainstream television — in other words wealthy, white, somewhat feminine men who are into things like show tunes, much like the characters of Will and Jack on *Will & Grace*. By coming into contact with people who share similar experiences with him, this member of the group was able to witness different forms of “gayness” and eventually became more comfortable with identifying as “gay.” In this way, on the corner among people like themselves, members of the group were able to rectify the burden of their “double consciousness,” if only for a moment, as their competing identities seemed to finally coincide.

To conclude, I have shown the precarious position that low-income queer people of color occupy in San Francisco’s urban spaces. Unable to express themselves fully in their home neighborhoods, where blatant homophobia or the mere fear of homophobic reactions seep into everyday life, low-income queer people of color escape to the Castro on weekend nights to liberate themselves from worry and judgment resulting from their sexuality. However, in the Castro, the more sexually-open so-called “Gay Mecca,” these low-income people of color face a second form of exclusion. Class barriers and racism within this neighborhood interact to relegate members of this group to a small area on the corner of Castro and Market St. In lieu of this double exclusion, low-income queer people of color forge a group that provides a real purpose in their lives, offering economic and emotional support and, more importantly, a certain short-lived denouement of their identity struggles.

Nonetheless, the situation on the ground for these low-income queer people of color is quite bleak. Members of this group have no real place to go and be their full selves other than a 100 square foot corner of a single city block, thus making it easier for them to fall through the gaps of San Francisco’s social fabric.

To come full circle and end on a more hopeful note, however, I ask: what is the future of the “Gay Mecca”? How could we recreate the Castro to be more like its representation as an idyllic place in popular culture? Fortunately, my interview respondents have an abundance of visions and ideas, but because time is running out, I will just leave you with this choice quote:

“It would definitely be more diverse...African American people would definitely have a bigger safety zone...or a comfortable place... There’d be more people doing outreach to younger people... and there’d be more people in the community who actually cared about the community and our people, [gay people]...Pricing would be a lot cheaper...and the lesbians would have more of a voice...Straight people would be aware that it is a gay place... but that it’s okay...and these younger kids would know that there was more to life than just partying...people [would have] more knowledge,...[and there would be] more conversations geared [around] what we have than what we didn’t have.”

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